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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 HAVANA 023582

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STATE DEPT FOR WHA/CCA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/11/2016

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [SOCI](#) [CU](#)

SUBJECT: ON HUMAN RIGHTS DAY, CUBAN MOB ATTACKS ACTIVISTS

REF: OP CENTER CALL TO USINT HUMAN RIGHTS OFFICER

12/10/06

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Classified By: COM Michael E. Parmly for Reason 1.4(d).

11. (C) Summary: A large group of Cuban communist militants and State Security officials broke up a Human Rights Day march by 12 peaceful activists, throwing several to the ground in front of UNESCO's Havana office. The activists, led by Dr. Darsi Ferrer Ramirez, were pushed, kicked and punched, though not severely, and briefly detained. Several camera crews and various photojournalists covered the event, which received prominent media attention. Poloff was roughed up slightly and had his camera broken. Later, 35 "Ladies in White" marched without incident after attending mass at Santa Rita church. The same day, around 30 leading activists gathered at the COMR for lunch and a spirited discussion on human rights and democratization. A newly released political prisoner and others endorsed the USG position that Raul Castro needs to consult with the Cuban people about democratization, not with the USG. The GOC's heavy-handed response to the Ferrer demonstration suggests that the regime fears popular discontent with Raul Castro's rule. Ferrer, for his part, says he is planning a bigger dissident event for early next year. End Summary.

12. (C) At least 200 communist militants mobilized by the Cuban Government joined at least 100 State Security officials December 10 in confronting and attacking 12 dissidents holding a silent march to mark International Human Rights Day. The activists, calling themselves the National Patriotic Front, started marching at 11 am around a small park in front of Havana's UNESCO building. The State Security officials were unmistakable by their earphones, and the pistols bulging from their waistbands. (Dozens of other political-police officials maintained an intimidating presence on surrounding blocks.) Also present at the park were at least three uniformed members of the Cuban military, including one officer.

SHOVED, KICKED, PUNCHED

13. (SBU) When the activists made it two-thirds of the way around the park, a man raised his hand to signal action by the militants, who, chanting "Viva Fidel," blocked the activists' path and pushed, kicked and punched them. The activists tried to stay together and continue their march, but the violence intensified. The mob isolated several activists and threw them to the ground. Each time an

activist was isolated s/he was grabbed by State Security officials and frog-marched away, into detention. On at least two occasions, State Security officials halted a passing (GOC) car, forced the activist inside, entered the car themselves and sped off. One activist had his "CHANGE" T-shirt yanked off. No serious injuries occurred, although activist Jamier Hernandez suffered a dislocated wrist and the lone female marcher, Yusnaimy Jorge, hyperventilated. All 12 activists were detained at a police station and released less than an hour later.

JOURNALISTS PRESENT

¶4. (SBU) Ferrer had made public his plans for the (unauthorized) march, and the international press was on hand. CNN, EFE and at least one other media organization sent a camera crew, and at least six other photojournalists were present. International media covered the park incident widely. (Note: We did not see any journalists being mistreated, but EFE reported that some foreign reporters were "verbally abused" by militants. End Note.)

POLOFF STRUCK

¶5. (C) As the last few remaining activists were being led away, a State Security official approached Poloff and ordered him to stop taking photos. Poloff explained that he was standing on a public street. Three men, suspected State Security officials, then shoved Poloff while a fourth struck him on the arm, causing the camera to fall to the ground. Poloff recovered the pocket camera, now broken, and did not offer resistance, leaving the scene. He was followed to his car by a half-dozen thugs who made a number of vague threats.

FERRER SATISFIED

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¶6. (C) Ferrer told us December 11 that the march went "better than I'd ever imagined... It will cost the Cuban Government politically for doing what it did at such an inopportune time." Ferrer said the disproportionate State Security reaction to the march shows that State Security is afraid of the people. Ferrer, of the Juan Bruno Zayas Center for Health and Human Rights, also said he is planning a bigger event early in the coming year. He said (please protect) he would organize five or six small groups of eight to ten dissidents each and have them simultaneously enter the lobbies of a half-dozen tourist hotels in Havana, carrying signs that read: "No More Apartheid in Cuba." (Note: Most Cubans are denied access to upscale hotels. End Note.)

'LADIES' MARCH WITHOUT INCIDENT

¶7. (C) Roughly an hour later, 35 "Ladies in White" - relatives of political prisoners -- held their weekly march, without incident, in front of Havana's Santa Rita church. The Ladies followed their march with a joint call for the release of their loved ones, and a cheer in support of human rights. (Note: Leading Lady Laura Pollan told us that on December 9, the group held a rare Saturday march from Pollan's home past the University of Havana to the outdoor Coppelia ice cream parlor. She said the public's response was overwhelmingly positive. End Note.)

USINT HONORS PRO-DEMOCRACY ADVOCATES

¶8. (SBU) Also on December 10, the COM hosted a lunch and human rights discussion for around 30 leading activists, including Martha Beatriz Roque of the Assembly to Promote Civil Society, Vladimiro Roca of All United, Elizardo Sanchez

of the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation, and six Ladies in White. (Oswaldo Paya of the Christian Liberation Movement was invited but unable to attend.) COM Parmlly offered a toast lamenting Cuba's totalitarianism and the plight of Cuba's political prisoners, but at the same time honoring the courage of those who speak out for freedom. This touched off a debate that was both spirited and emotional. Some participants criticized the lack of unity among opposition groups; others wrangled over the implications of accepting U.S. assistance, while still others cried while thanking the United States for providing support to the dissident movement when "nobody else cared." A focal point for the gathering was the display of the "prisoners of conscience quilt," crafted by a Boston NGO.

"WE WILL DETERMINE WHO AND WHAT YOU ARE"

19. (SBU) At one poignant moment during the discussion, veteran dissident Felix Bonne recalled one of the times he was arrested, trying to argue with police that he and his group were only a small number of professors stating a point of view. "We (the regime) will determine who and what you are," was the reply. This was in the context of whether or not accepting U.S. aid made any difference in how harshly the regime would handle opposition. Recently released political prisoner Hector Palacios, among others, argued that the USG's rejection of talks with Raul Castro was spot on: "He has to negotiate with us, the Cuban people, first."

CANADIAN AMBO'S TAKE

110. (C) An hour after the mob attack on Darsi Ferrer and company, Poloff bumped into Canadian Ambassador Bugailiskis, as well as German, Dutch and EC officials at Santa Rita. After chatting briefly on what had happened, the Canadian envoy shared her planned course of action: telling the GOC that "although we know no Cuban Government officials were involved in the attack, the GOC should take steps to stop citizens from attacking other citizens." We noted that State Security officials, many with earphones and firearms visible, took part in the beatings and detained the activists. We noted that Cuban soldiers were also present. We suggested holding the GOC accountable for what was clearly its involvement in attacking peaceful human rights activists. She replied: "That would get us nowhere." We replied: "At least it would be honest."

COMMENT

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111. (C) The GOC mobilized an unnecessarily large group of communist militants - mainly Party members, veterans, and members of Committees for the Defense of the Revolution - to snuff out the Human Rights Day demonstration. State Security usually avoids conspicuous shows of violence against dissidents in Havana, home to many foreign journalists and diplomats. Its heavy-handed response suggests a characteristic Raul trait -- fear of public discontent -- but surprisingly little concern about public relations. Raul's clique had heretofore been careful not to appear in public to be taking a hard line (e.g., through isolated releases of detainees, while mobilizing widespread intimidation tactics.) In this case, however, they panicked. The debate among dissidents at the Residence, on the other hand, revealed a cross-section of views on how best to deal with the current political situation in Cuba. All present agreed on the basic objectives for the near term: release political prisoners, and permit free association among Cubans to allow them to build a post-communist society.

PARMLY